

NOTES

1. Robert Browning, "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," *Robert Browning: The Poems*, ed. John Pettigrew, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1981) 358.
2. Pettigrew 1079–80.
3. The New Testament of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (Paterson, New Jersey: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1951).
4. John Rist, *Augustine* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 1994) 114, 116.
5. Rist 116.
6. Rist 116.
7. Rist 119.

Ibsen's A DOLL'S HOUSE

In Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Nora abandons her children. This offense against motherhood shocked the play's original audience just as it shocks some students of literature today. Certainly the play questions the real definition of motherhood. Although Ibsen disavowed feminist causes, he launches an attack on patriarchy by denigrating its prime symbol, the father. Critics and audiences often miss what the play says about fatherhood. In *A Doll's House*, fatherhood, ordinarily associated with the authority and stability of patriarchy, is associated with abandonment, illness, absence, and corruption.

Mrs. Linde, Nora's friend, is the victim of an absent father. Although it is not obvious, her father's absence lies at the bottom of her plight. To support her sick mother and her brothers, Mrs. Linde married a man she did not love. The absence of her father forced her to seek a new father figure in a rich husband, but he too fails in this role, becoming bankrupt and an invalid. By depicting the father as absent or polluted, Ibsen defames the patriarchal figure.

In *A Doll's House*, the absent father permeates all classes. When Anne Marie, Nora's nursemaid and the caretaker of her children, gives birth to an illegitimate child, she is forced to take a position with Nora's family and to leave her children. But the absence of child's father lies at the at the bottom of her plight. She says of him: "That slippery fish, he did not do a thing for me" (155).

The play depicts the father not only as absent but also as morally polluted. Nils Krogstad, Nora's blackmailer and Mrs. Linde's former fiancé, is a father desperately trying to raise his children to redeem himself. Nevertheless, he has committed the crime of forgery, and instead of taking his punishment, he has covered up the crime. According to Torvald Helmer, Nora's husband, this crime renders him a pollutant. "Every breath the children take in [his home] is filled with the germs of something degenerate" (152). Although Helmer is less than reputable in his opinions, he does voice the social opinions of his

times. Again, fatherhood is connected with a moral disease that will infect and destroy the lives of the children.

The polluted father also appears in the father of Dr. Rank, Nora and Torvald's friend. Because Rank's father kept mistresses and contracted syphilis, Rank inherited the disease and was "sickly from birth" (156). Rank must suffer for "somebody else's sins" (163). Rank extends his own condition to the condition of humanity, finding the "inevitable retribution of nature" (163) in every family. Thus, fatherhood itself is connected to universal pollution.

Torvald Helmer is another example of a failed father. He has little to do with his children. When the children come in, he states that the place is only fit for a mother. When Nora's crime is revealed, he gives in to Krogstad's demands, making him even more hypocritical than Krogstad. He too becomes a father of lies and disguise, polluting his own children.

The inherited pollution of the father also inscribes Nora's behavior. Commenting on Nora's carelessness about debt, Helmer states that she is "[e]xactly the way your father was" (128). After he discovers that Nora has committed forgery, Helmer realizes "All your father's flimsy values have come out in you" (187). The patriarchal father, as in Rank's case, has also passed on his corruption to his child. But the influence of the father has been passed on to the husband, locking Nora in an incestuous bond. She tells Torvald, "I've been your doll-wife just as at home I was Papa's doll child" (191). Nora leaves to escape this bond.

About the play, Ibsen observed, "There are two kinds of spiritual law [. . .] one in man and one in woman [. . .] but the woman is judged in practical matters by man's law." He emphasizes that his society "is exclusively a male society with laws written by men and with prosecutors and judges who judge women's behavior from the male standpoint" (qtd. in Ferguson 230). This is Ibsen's view of the patriarchy. Even though *A Doll's House* clearly deals with motherhood and examines the nature of marriage, a close examination of the text shows that fatherhood—the bulwark of the patriarchy—is absent or corrupted.

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WORKS CITED

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- Ferguson, Robert. *Henrik Ibsen: A New Biography*. London: Cohen, 1996.

